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ABSTRACT

This 16th annual report presents information on current trends and issues informally discussed by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions. Issues discussed included the following: (1) Commission on Composition (Rick Gerhardt, director): the role of writing in literacy; computers and writing instruction; interactions of race, class, language, and learning; large-scale writing assessment; limited preparation to teach writing; excessive teacher workload; teaching grammar; writing across the curriculum; (2) Commission on Curriculum (Kathleen Rowland): curriculum reduction; teacher support; high-stakes assessment; the canon; and technology; (3) Commission on Language (Judith Wells Lindfors): career changers becoming teachers; trends mandating specific teaching methodology; the role of research in relation to classroom practices in English/Language Arts; supporting students' right to their own language; and language awareness study; (4) Commission on Literature (Michael Moore): critical literacy and multicultural literature; (5) Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire): support for public schooling; professional development of teachers; and the need for informed discussion about reading, theory, research, and practice; and (6) Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller) discussed non print media (including issues of unequal access to technology, and media literacy); copyright issues; censorship; and media and visual literacy. (SR)

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ED 428 396

Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 1999—Six Summaries

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions
of the National Council of Teachers of English

Compiled by Dale Allender, NCTE

During their meetings at the November 1998 Annual Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas here do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the 16th annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

COMMISSION ON COMPOSITION (Rick Gebhardt, Director).

1. *The Role of Writing in Literacy.* Members of the Commission on Composition are concerned about the limited place of writing in public and academic discussions about literacy. Because of recent reading debates and the energy needed to respond professionally to narrow definitions of reading, the importance of writing is being eclipsed even before it achieves parity with reading in literacy studies and in school practices. We urge continued advocacy for the critical role of writing in literacy and emphasis on the critical need for attention to writing in research, in public policy about literacy, in staff and curriculum development services, and in informed classroom practice by language arts teachers at all levels.
2. *Computers and Writing Instruction.* The Commission continues to discuss the impact of computers on teaching—a trend raising significant issues about the quality of software available to support writing instruction, the lack of training of teachers to utilize computers in writing instruction, the pace with which library and other research resources are being shifted to computers, and the widely varying access students and teachers have to computers of sufficient capacity to utilize library and Internet resources.
3. *Interactions of Race, Class, Language, and Learning.* Our focus on the need for second-language perspectives in the teaching of writing broadened to include concern about the complex interactions of race, class, and language and their impacts on learning and on the way learners are treated, evaluated, and categorized. Two related areas seem particularly problematic at the present time: emphasis on grammar and standard English and large-scale assessment of writing.
4. *Large-Scale Writing Assessment.* Large-scale assessment, often conducted by corporations removed from the local context of schools and students continues to grow. We see assessment linked often in problematic ways—to other issues and trends in the teaching of writing in America's schools, among them: teacher workload; the preparation of faculty as writing teachers; and the way students, especially those less grounded in standard English, are treated, evaluated, and categorized.

One of the Commission's major concerns is the negative impact of assessment on teaching and literacy. In some cases, the curriculum is being distorted, for instance by reducing time for some topics in order to increase instruction in grammar and in the sorts of essays that score well on assessment tests. Similarly, the attention of students and teachers is being diverted

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to test preparation of all kinds. Given such erosion in curriculum and teaching time, we wonder whether large-scale assessment programs are driven as much by the educational goal of literacy as they are by political and financial motivations.

5. *Limited Preparation to Teach Writing.* The Commission discussed the limited training to teach writing typical in teacher-preparation programs—particularly of elementary school teachers—and in professional-development programs for in-service teachers. This limitation exacerbates problems involved in assessment by leaving teachers less well-prepared than they could be to adjust instruction to accommodate demands of large-scale assessment programs. Members of the Commission urge continuing attention to the need for professional standards in the teaching of writing, for substantial writing components in teacher-preparation programs, and for effective staff development at all grade levels.
6. *Excessive Teacher Workload.* Despite some excellent models of large-scale writing instruction, the typical workload of public school teachers (class size, number of sections and preparations, lack of planning time, etc.) undermines effective teaching of writing. Excessive workload also exacerbates various problems of writing assessment by leaving teachers less time and energy with which to adjust instruction to accommodate demands of large-scale assessment programs.
7. *Teaching Grammar.* Grammar instruction continues to be an issue for teachers whose efforts to teach it in the context of writing clash with public expectations of direct work with grammar, usage, and standard English. This persistent issue—of particular consequence for students studying English as a second language—is complicated by several other trends. First, heavy teaching loads may encourage teachers to use grammar drill rather than extensive writing. Second, those with limited preparation to teach writing may use out-of-context grammar instruction more readily than those familiar with research about the ineffectiveness of the approach. Third, the place of usage and grammar in the rubrics of many assessment instruments raises expectations of parents, policymakers, and some teachers that schools should teach grammar and standard usage directly.
8. *Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).* Interest continues in WAC, but so do problems and inefficiencies of WAC teaching. One of the most persistent of these problems is the perceived competition of writing with the subject-matter content of courses. An emerging negative trend associated with WAC may be a devaluing of the professional credentials of language arts faculty well-trained in writing by those who take WAC to mean that anyone can teach writing. On the other hand, there is some evidence that writing components are appearing in assessments of math, social sciences, and sciences. The presence of such essay components in subject-matter assessment may strengthen WAC by motivating subject matter teachers to emphasize writing in their classes, to participate in WAC activities in their schools, and to seek ideas from language arts faculty well-trained in writing.
9. *Formulaic Writing.* A new trend in some areas of the country is what some Commission members labeled formulaic writing: teaching artificial essay forms called for in writing assessments rather than encouraging students to use writing for broader and

more significant ends of learning and communication. Besides being concerned about this practice in itself, members of the Commission see formulaic writing instruction as a concrete illustration of the negative influence writing assessment can have on teaching and curriculum.

10. *Dual-Credit Courses.* The worthy goal of closer cooperation between schools and colleges is encouraging dual-credit courses and other means by which capable students can earn college credit for appropriate high school work. The approach can be very beneficial, especially for students who complete college more efficiently and economically. But members of the Commission are concerned that the approach could, in some cases, result in courses that do not meet the curricular goals or student needs of a college or school.

COMMISSION ON CURRICULUM (Kathleen Rowlands, Director).

1. *Curriculum Reduction.* The Commission is concerned about the reduction of curriculum to nothing more than a course booklist or a document describing the goals, resources, and tasks that occupy the student's year. We encourage the profession to insist upon continued reexamination of our curricular beliefs and designs, and to resist educational, commercial, or political efforts to stifle that inquiry through limited definitions of literacy or narrow-minded conceptions of research. The Commission is concerned about inappropriate standards documents and their use to suppress curricula discussions and to inhibit teachers' professional development. However, we applaud the use of generative standards documents such as the NCTE/IRA Standards that support teachers in their work.
2. *Teacher Support.* We urge support for classroom teachers who are forced to teach under repressive district, state, or national curricular mandates. Such mandates silence the professional voices of teachers and their students as well. Further, we call upon the profession to work toward establishing school climates where teachers are encouraged to collaborate with one another in the pursuit of professional understandings. Such collegiality is essential if we are to move beyond impositions on professional freedom.

The Commission applauds administrators who collaborate with teachers to design curriculum and to create the conditions in which it can flourish. In addition, we call on all administrators to join with teachers in professional development activities, in curricular thinking, and in planning budgets, calendars, space use, staffing, and schedules. The Commission believes all administrators need to be knowledgeable about research and practice in order to explain and advocate the curriculum that the school has developed. We celebrate schools in which professional development, including curricular design, is integral to our work.

Educators and the communities in which they work have no choice but to respond to current political efforts that undermine education in a democracy. The energy required to support this response detracts from more generative academic pursuits. We call upon the profession to help teachers defend good teaching against the corrosive effects of formulaic programs that reduce learning to collecting points on multiple-choice tests and against governmentally legislated rejection of those forms of research most likely to contribute to our understanding of complex linguistic behavior.

3. *High-Stakes Assessment.* The Commission strongly opposes the mandating of high-stakes assessment by legislative bodies, particularly when such mandates are not applied to all schools public, private, home, and charter—in a state. Such selectively

applied mandates are damaging to equitable public education. We believe an overreliance on isolated testing exacts from our students an emotional toll and consumes an inordinate amount of classroom time and staggering sums of money. We call upon the educational community to develop assessment policies, tools, and procedures that speak to the shared interests of all stakeholders (students, teachers, school officials, parents, and policymakers). We cannot tolerate the continuing abuse of assessment to sort, label, and rank children, teachers, and schools.

4. *The Canon.* In response to a historically narrow canon, we see an alarming trend toward the attempted establishment of alternate canons that are also unbalanced. The Commission applauds the development of K–college curriculum that includes works across genres, across centuries, across different cultures, regions, and ethnicities, and that represents both male and female writers.
5. *Technology.* The Commission acknowledges the growing need to weave technology into the curriculum and to define and develop the skills of viewing and visual representation as an integral part of a curriculum that recognizes communication in all arenas. The Commission recognizes that technology is comprised of tools that may facilitate classroom practice and that both students and teachers benefit from training in the appropriate uses of technology, including evaluation of worthwhile resources. Furthermore, the viewing and visual representation literacies called for in the NCTE/IRA Standards require a certain expertise in using a variety of technological tools. We remain concerned that lack of access to technology and technology training often increases the differences between economically advantaged and disadvantaged individuals and communities.

COMMISSION ON LANGUAGE (Judith Wells Lindfors, Director).

1. *Career Changers Becoming Teachers.* As persons leave other careers to enter the teaching profession, their needs as teachers beginning this new road remain largely unmet. A focused study on the needs of these "beginning" teachers who have a wealth of life experiences that can make them very effective instructors is greatly needed.
2. *Trends Mandating Specific Methodology for Elementary and Secondary Classrooms and Teacher-Education Programs.* We seek to speak out against the continued reduction of teacher autonomy. We seek to oppose legal mandates that impose phonics instruction (e.g., in California); require that phonics be taught in teacher-education programs; require IEPs for Special Education students; and prohibit the use of dialogue journals in classrooms.
3. *The Role of Research in Relation to Classroom Practices in English/Language Arts.* We seek to support teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers by unpacking the political language of terms and phrases such as "replicable, reliable, research" that control research and practices in reading. Aspects that need to be considered in this process include: the reciprocal relationships between research and practice; the limitations of research when it is applied in an isomorphic (one-to-one) way to classroom instruction, without teacher knowledge and understanding; the paradigmatic differences of educational research designs (e.g., experimental, case study, ethnographic); and the role of theory (of the nature of society, power relationships,

language, learning, and teaching) in informing classroom practice and research.

4. *Supporting Students' Rights to Their Own Language.* Students have the right to access, think about, read, write, speak, and listen to material of their choice. This right includes both the *content* of their choice, and also linguistically, politically, culturally, and generationally varied *voices*. Students should also have the freedom to exercise their rights in the aforementioned areas in their own languages, dialects, and registers, whatever these might be, and from their own cultural perspectives, without fear of threats, reprisals and/or degradation.

These rights should be asserted and protected by making educators, politicians, and the general public aware of their own continuing responsibility to respect the rights of students to make these choices.

5. *Language Awareness Study for Teachers and Students.* Integrating language-awareness study into the classroom is a necessary means of creating coherence between the language knowledge of teachers and that of students. This knowledge base must be innovatively presented to both teachers and students, primarily through the concept of language use and the validity of speech and writing practiced and used by all students. As new strategies are being designed for overcoming the divisions in the language arts, classroom integration of language study must become a priority.

COMMISSION ON LITERATURE (Michael Moore, Director).

1. *Critical Literacy.* How do we go about developing and promoting the fundamental idea of literature as transformation when "quick fixes" by school districts and politically popular mandates that are not supported by teachers pull us away from our first duty? How do we as English language arts teachers develop critical pedagogy in light of such popular and political initiatives like state assessments? Teaching the skills necessary for skills testing while at the same time attending to what we hope is the transformative power of literature are not mutually inclusive. Teaching students to read against text seems to be an oxymoron to bowing to the authority of the text in order to pass state assessments, which are often objective in nature.

Our ability to teach critical literacy relies to a large extent on understanding and using our own literacy histories as we teach literature. By this, we mean that we need to consider how we, ourselves, became literate and then how critical literacy continues to transform our lives and teaching. We must also encourage our students to explore and share their own literacy histories. To this extent it is incumbent on teachers and students to develop their own critical literacy and continually establish their memberships in the world of readers. Reading and reflection are at the heart of teaching and learning literature. Schools are often not supportive of teachers and students in this pursuit. If we allow popular and fundamentalist notions of what should be taught to continue without a proactive stance by our profession, then we will have reduced literature study to little more than a scientific exercise in formal recall.

2. *Multicultural Literature.* When multicultural literature is discussed, it is usually about selection and appropriateness for readers. However, a larger concern is whether or not teachers are dealing with multicultural issues when they teach multicultural literature. Is there a tendency to teach multicultural literature using time-honored strategies that reduce the literature to a series of reading routines without dealing with the multicultural issues and themes? How careful are we with our language when teaching the literature of other cultures? Teaching multicultural literature has the power to transform each of us by making us sensitive to language diversity and critical cultural issues. Yet to what extent is this a valued outcome for our schools and our society?

COMMISSION ON READING (Mary H. Maguire, Director).

Four major issues warrant on-going critical examination, reflection, and action.

1. support for public schooling;
2. professional development of teachers;
3. informed discussion about reading, theory, research, and practice in the national and professional conversation; and
4. understanding the complex intersections among race, class, gender, and language in reading, literacy, curriculum, and practices in mainstream, bilingual, and multicultural communities. These issues were identified by commission members three years ago and have not gone away.

The Commission is concerned about how the politics of reading has become increasingly adversarial. We have serious reservations and deep concerns about the dominance and momentum of state educational policy reforms and legislation that rely on reductive research practices that constrain and distort how and why children learn to read and become literate, and narrowly prescribe what teachers can and cannot teach (e.g., the research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development). We worry about the imposition of purported "reputable and reliable" research that mandates teachers to adopt a code emphasis and denies the complexity of teaching and learning.

We reiterate our 1997 statement: Competing voices in the educational arena raise fundamental questions about what's really behind the new educational agenda, the survival of public schooling, and what governs people's thinking about what schools and teachers ought or ought not to be doing in terms of reading, but also in terms of writing, language, curriculum, literature, and media. Misguided notions must be replaced with more deliberative inquiries and informed discussions of what it means to be literate.

The Commission strongly believes that "quick fixes" to perceived reading, literacy, or school problems—such as teaching more phonics, returning to the basics, creating more testing, or even creating charter schools—won't meet the needs of the diverse populations of students in schools. More importantly, "quick fixes" will not guarantee a nation of readers who read critically and willingly.

We reaffirm our commitment to the professional development of teachers. We still believe that the professional development of teachers is everybody's responsibility. Similarly, we continue to work on more effective ways in which we can communicate with parents, educate colleagues and the general public about the theoretical and practical issues in reading, language, and schooling. Issues of race, class, gender, language, and multiple literacies need to become embedded in our conversations at all levels.

COMMISSION ON MEDIA (Lawrence B. Fuller, Director).

1. *Nonprint Media.* There is an explosive development of nonprint media electronic technology, such as the accelerating switch from analog to digitized electronics, which affects all aspects of electronic communication. It promises greater speed, visual fidelity and interactivity, more broadcast channels, and the ultimate integration of telephone, television, radio, and Internet communication. While the new technology has definite advantages, and costs of implementing it are declining, concerns exist as to whether all schools will be able to make the transition smoothly. Many poorer districts have barely begun to provide minimal equipment in the older versions of computers and VCRs. Rapid adoption of the digitized technology and the relevant software and programming by well-to-do districts may mean that the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" may increase exponentially with students in "have-not" schools falling further behind in academic and career skills.

These economic factors often lead underfunded school districts to turn to business interests to obtain equipment and services. While financial support from corporations can help districts enrich their programs through purchase of equipment and curricular materials, quite often there are strings attached. Following on the heels of Channel 1's program, providing television monitors and news programming with the proviso

that students view advertising daily, corporations like Zap Me are offering schools access to the Internet with the condition that schools use the company's servers which contain "brand-name recognition" materials. Such corporations see students primarily as a market to be exploited with the lure of technological innovation.

These media-based invasions of school buildings can have at least some pedagogical benefits if teachers understand the issues involved and encourage students to critically examine their implications. However, evidence still accumulates that many beginning teachers, much less veteran teachers, lack the knowledge base and technical skills to exploit these commercial texts in their teaching. We applaud plans by the Public Broadcast System to develop a channel devoted to pedagogy, as it moves to involve teachers in curricular development in conjunction with series like *Masterpiece Theatre's* American literature project. Comparable linkages with classroom teachers in developing educational software are desirable. Likewise, the New Mexico Media Literacy Project offers a model for how an entire state's teaching corps can receive relevant in-service training.

However, disturbingly high numbers of new teachers are still uncomfortable with analyzing television programming and films, with teaching students how to use e-mail, word processing, and the Internet, and developing Web sites. Integrating the new technologies into traditional instruction in literature, speech, and composition generally sparks students' interest and achievement. Survival, much less success, in higher education and the job market requires that students develop such skills. Fortunately, many students have realized this necessity, and many teachers report that some have learned how to analyze and use the new technologies from their pupils. One ironic development is that the demand for such skills is so high that many college graduates, including practicing teachers, who gain such skills in programs like instructional technology, find themselves lured into working in business and government where demand is strong and salaries high.

2. *Copyright Issues.* As more students learn how to create Internet Web sites, issues involving copyright intensify. For years some teachers have avoided copyright issues by limiting use of copyrighted material to the classroom. However, as the Internet expands and students and teachers create Web sites accessible from around the world, issues of copyright violation grow. Therefore, the federal government needs to modify copyright law so that purely educational use enjoys protection while recognizing the interests of the copyright holder. Teachers and school administrators need to have clear concepts of what the law allows and forbids.
3. *Censorship.* Traditional legalities involving censorship of nonprint materials continue to raise concerns. Of special concern is the continuing reliance of school districts on the rating system of the Motion Picture Association. The R-rating is especially bothersome, as many producers seek this rating as opposed to PG-13 or PG in order to attract adolescent audiences. Oftentimes the content that leads to such ratings is peripheral to the central curricular value of the film and can be easily excised and avoided. Too many teachers, however, find themselves in legal difficulty for using such R-rated films in secondary school classes. Some have lost their jobs, as courts uphold the district's right to control curriculum and to fire teachers who use such films. The Commission agrees that all films or television programs used in classrooms need to be justified as academically suitable, but it questions the wisdom of a blanket injunction against any film rated R. Minors can already attend R-rated films if accompanied by an adult; in the classroom the teacher serves in that role.
4. *Media and Visual Literacy.* The launching of commercial publications like *Brill's Content*, the popularity of the film *The Truman Show*, as well as media criticism in weekly news magazines, daily newspapers, and some television channels suggest that many segments of American society are concerned about the possibilities and dangers of the increasingly "wired" world in which news stories via the Internet and various television networks develop, peak, and vanish with startling speed. Moreover, the Com-

mission senses a concern that, despite all the technological innovation and information access, many of the significant political, social, and economic developments remain obscure or unreported, as the Internet, broadcast and cable television, the film industry, and various print media become increasingly under the control of a few major media conglomerates. Ironically, as the sheer number of outlets grows, the quality of programming, whether for information or entertainment, appears to decline and program recycling increases. The tabloidization of the media as seen in the coverage of the Lewinsky-Clinton incident worries many. Nevertheless, media educators remain hopeful that through systematic instruction and integration the upcoming generation can learn to employ these marvelous electronic technologies in ways that enrich human knowledge, culture, and well-being.